JOY TO THE WORLD
PSALM 47
NEW TESTAMENT SELECTED

JUNE 23, 1974

READ PS. 47 R.S.V.

Robert Hudnut has written a diary of sorts, recording daily reflections on his ministry. One of the entries reads:

"I preached an old sermon this week. It is fatal. There's nothing staler than an old sermon. I've got a cracker barrell as deep as the next fellow's but I rarely dig into it. Only when I get caught by too much emergency pastoral work.

It's not that the older sermon isn't good. It's often better than the current crop, and certainly better than one done in a few hours. It's just that it's old. It no longer comes alive for me." (Surprised by God. P.41)

If you are concluding that my reading that is a warning that I'm about to preach an old sermon, you are, at least partially correct. It also happens to echo precisely my sentiments about old sermons. They're stale - at least for the preacher. And yet, as I confronted the choice of what to say on the few Sundays remaining in this pulpit I kept coming back to those major ideas that have grown in importance for me, not only as sermon material, but as the real stuff of life: life as I have lived it primarily in relationship with the people of this congregation over the past eight years.

At the top of that list of ideas - is Joy: joy as a component of Christian Faith: joy as a basic life-stance. And so I pulled several sermons from the file: and freshened them up for the occasion: and discovered again what experience has already taught me - namely that it takes more time to do this job properly than to start from scratch.

Thus ~~There's~~ - Joy to the World -

Listen, for starters, to some scripture: first a paraphrase of the 47th Psalm which I've already read from the R.S.V.: and then some samplings from the rest of the Bible:

"Clap your hands, stamp your feet! Let your bodies and your voices explode with joy. God is not some human concoction. He is for real! And he is here! Despite all attempts to rationalize him out of existence, He is in our world, and he reighns over our universe.

The rulers of nations often ignore him. Men of learning often pass him by. The masses of his creatures substitute their own little gods in his place and worship the things they can see and feel. There are others who build fortresses about themeselves and manifest no need for God.'

Our great God will not be ignored. He will not remove himself from our world. Let us recognize his presence and fill the air with his praises." (Pharaphrase - Psalm 47, "Alive")

"So the Lord's people shall come back,set free, and enter Zion with shouts of triumph, crowned with everlasting joy: joy and gladness shall overtake them as they come, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 51:11)

"At the sight of the star they were goverjoyed." (Matthew 2:10)

"Do not be afraid: I have good news for you: there is great joy coming to the whole people." (Luke 2:10)

"How blest are you when men hate you...On that day be glad and dance for joy." (Luke 6:23)

"I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.: (John 15:11)

"They hurried away from the tomb in awe and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples." (Matthew 28:8)

"The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, ~~XXXXX~~ peace and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him, until by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope." (Romans 15:13)

"We write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete." (1 John 1:4)

The late Harry Emerson Fosdick, reflecting on passages such as those, once wrote: "The New Testament is the most joyful book in the world. It opens with joy over the birth of Jesus; and it ends with a superb picture of a multitude which no man could number, singing Hallelujah Choruses. No matter where you open it, amid unfortunate and discouraging circumstances, you always hear the note of joy.

Even when a company of friends gather at a farewell supper before their leader is crucified, he says to them, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.'

When an apostle is put in jail overnight he passes the time singing, and if you listen to him in his Roman prison, you will hear him dictating, 'Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice.'

There is enough tragedy in the New Testament to make it the saddest book in the world, but instead, it is the most joyful."

The Shorter Chatechism, an old, dusty document in archaic language written in 1647 begins with a rather remarkable a-ffirmative. The first question is "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer reads, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." It's not what you'd expect 17th century Reformers to write about the nature of man. But they did, and they had hold of something very important; namely that our purpose in being here is to live in the right relationship with our creator, and that the product of that relationship ought to be joy. We affirm that every time we worship together:

Why did God create us?

To glorify and enjoy him forever!

And yet I think it would be fair to generalize that we don't. Most of us - most of the time don't think in terms of enjoying God. Perhaps we don't enjoy much of anything. And who can blame us? After all, the future can look pretty grim, and the present doesn't look so hot either. We're fouling up the rivers, oceans, air and landscape. We can't live on the energy we are producing and we can't produce any more without

further fouling up the rivers, oceans and air and landscape. We have more chemical and bacteriological weapons in our secret arsenals than we can dispose of decently: we have more nuclear power than we need to incinerate every man, woman and child on the face of the globe several times over, and congress has just approved abudget that will enable us to refine and expand that capacity. We have cities that can't be governed and more educated people than jobs; spiralling school costs and high taxes; pornography masquerading as entertainment. drugs in the classroom: and a whole ~~cohery~~ Covey of high federal officians convicted or on trial for makeng a mockery of the democratic process - which means us.

What a delight, several weeks ago, to see a television show that resurrected the humor of Will Rogers: a simple humor with the grace to laugh at ourselves and to gain a new perspective on all the weighty problems that bear down on us. But who can blame us for being less than joyful? ?

More to the point, however, our religion - which ~~XX~~ if the Bible and Shorter Chatechism are to be trusted - ought to be the source of joy in contrast to the grimmness of the world - more to the point, our religion isn't very joyful either.

The reasons are two, I believe. The first goes back to the days of the early church when ~~Gre~~ thinking began to influence our Hebrew forfathers. Thanks to the Greeks the early Christians over the years came to the conclusion that things of the spirit are good, while things of the flesh and the world are bad. That ~~dinotomy~~ 'division of reality into two categories was a direct contradition of Hebrew, or Old Testament Theology. The faith of Israel was essentially life-affirming, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ lusty, earthy. But Christian Faith, filtered through Greek philosophy quickly became life-denying. The result was a theological stance which really didn't mean what it said when it affirmed that God created allthings good. In fact, it came periously close at times to saying, in effect, that God had made a rather monumental mistake when he gave men bodies. In the

name of religious piety men starved themselves, slept three hours a night and mortified the flesh by all sorts of self=inflicted pain. All pleasure was suspect - sexuality was to be hidden, disguised - and empoloyed only for the obvious necessity of propagating the race. Whatever was fun, joyful, pleasure producing - had to be bad.

Now, not many people would articulate their faith in those terms today, and yet I believe the philosophic residue is still with us: and that for many people having fun and feeling good is just a little suspect.

The second reason our faith is not always joyful or joy producing has to do with the Puritains. The Puritains are much maligned in a thoughtless way and I don't want to be part of that. But they did believe that any expression of joy - anything that looked like a celebration, or lots of fun, was inherently of the devil and sinful. Frivolity of any kind was frowned upon: even Christmas as a celebration was abolished, by the more vehement Puritains.

Again, there aren't many people who think that way today. And yet the Puritain influence on the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition in this country was immense. With the result that many of us grew up in churches that were essentially grim, dull, sober and no fun at all. We may not associate fun and joy with sin any more: but neither do we associate fun and joy with Christian Faith.

Karl Barth once wrote: "A gloomy, morose and melancholy Christian can obviously attest only a gloomy, morose and melancholy Gospel. Such a gospel (would be) not of Christ, but of the world without him, of a God who is not for us but against us...it would not be good or glad news, but bad or sad news - the saddest of all." (C.Dogm IV 3 P.661)

Or more to the point, listen to the words of a woman sitting in a service of worship.

"In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smilling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling.

Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, ("Stop that grinning! You're in church!') With that, she gave him a belt on his hindside and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, 'That's better,' and returned to her prayers.

Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me that the entire world is in tears and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to hold this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. I wanted to tell him he was an understanding God. One who understands little children who pick their noses in Church because they are bored. He understands the man in the parking lot who reads the comics while his wife is attending Church. He even understands my shallow prayers that implore, ("if you can't make me ~~XXXX~~ thin, then make my friends look fat.!)

What a fool, I thought. Here ~~XX~~ was a woman sitting next to the only light left in our civilization...The only hope, our only miracle...our only promise of infinity. If he couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?" (~~P.9"Alive"~~)

We were created to glorify and enjoy God. We were made to be joy-experiencing creatures. Children do. Children enjoy what comes at them in life. James Cavanaugh wrote a touching bit of verse on the subject.

"Little boy, ~~XMX~~ I miss you, with your sudden smile
and your ignorance of pain.
You walked in life and devoured it...without anything but
misty goals to keep you company.
Your heart beat mightily when you chased frogs
There was not time for meaning - a marshmallow gave it on
a sharpened stick -
a jacknife in your pocket...
a flower in the woods....

A dog who danced and licked at your fingers
and chewed your jeans.
A game of football you didn't expect
A glass of cider, a cricket's cry.
When did you loose your eyes and ears, when did taste
buds cease to tremble:
Whence this sulleness, this mounting fear, this quarrel
with life - demanding meaning?" (There Are Men Too Gentle to Live Among Wolves)

The idea that has grown in significance for me - the idea that I want to share with you = is that God has created us for joy. I have known that answer to the question in the Shorter Chatechism since I was a boy, but only in recent years have I come to understand that it means exactly what it says - ("Man's Chief End is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.:)

The Irony of it is that the whole reason we are here: the entire rationale for the existence of this or any church is something called good news: not bad news or sad news - or even ambiguous news. It sounds like this. There is a God whose primary characteristic is love. He has made the world - he made us - he is still creating. He loves us so much that he sent his son to live among us to show that even in the midst of pain and suffering and death, love remains supreme, unconquerable, everlasting. And so you and I are safe - and free. Nothing in life can defeat us: nothing can ultimately hurt us. The sting has been taken out of death: there is no reason to be afraid. God still loves us and comes among us in many ways - as a comforter, friend; as a resource; as a prod to our conscience and a buoy for our hopes.

There is at the heart of our life as a Christian people the very best of all possible news. News that needs to be sung and affirmed and told to our children and shared among us and written all over our faces and we confront a joyless world.

We need that. And it is my deepest conviction that the world needs us to be what we say we are: people who are in the business of enjoying our God forever.

St. Augustine, once said: ("A Christian sould be an alleluia from head to foot":) and Jesus Christ, our Lord: ("I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you. and your joy complete.") AMEN

OUR FATHER: we want to be joyful: we want to feel and express and share joy. Help us. Help us to see the good and beautiful in our own lives - and the lives of others. Give us the grace to enjoy: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN